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# THE HAND-PICKED JOB

## AN INCIDENT IN THE WORK OF THE STATE POLICE

By KATHERINE MAYO

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NOBODY ever dies in Freeland, so they say. The hills are too high, the air too good, the sky too broad, the spring water too lively. So, if you go there ever so long from now you still should find Frank Malloy and Squire Malloy—no kin to each other, those two, though their fathers did come from the same glen in Donegal—and Mr. McGee and Mike Lupotka and Daniel Breslin and the rest. And they will all tell you the very same tale, if you ask them.

But Daniel Breslin's brother-in-law might not be there—who knows?—for he has gone away to France with a rifle on his shoulder. And as for little Annie Voichek, her sweet face is no more for the gaze of men, any where.

Freeland perches above the rhododendron thickets and the trout-stream woods, some seventeen miles south of Wilkes-Barre. It is the highest inhabited spot in Pennsylvania, they like to tell you. But however that may be, it is certainly high of spirit. The landlady of the Central Hotel leads you into her parlor with the air of making you welcome to a Christmas surprise. The red-cheeked girl in the dining room as smilingly as truthfully assures you "It's *all* good!" when you hesitate over the bill of fare. And the town council reposing on the middle of its spine in the front windows of the lobby, looks too gaily content ever to move.

Frank Malloy's tailor shop flourishes in the hotel basement. Daniel Breslin's undertaking establishment (how in the world does this man live!) dominates the lower street, and all the remaining conveniences desired by a comfortable population of six thousand men and women, alive or dead, string cheerfully along between.

Then, on the outskirts, come a few factories and machine shops. And beyond, and all around, mines, mines, mines,

with still more mines, or "mine patches." And of course, where those things are, things do happen occasionally.

When Captain Pitcher, commanding "B" Troop of the Pennsylvania State Police, sent Corporal Freeman and two privates of the Force over to mother the place, nothing in particular was going on, however, beyond the usual little trickle of human incident.

Nevertheless, "Was I glad to see 'em?" Mike Lupotka exclaimed. "Why, Lord love you, I *got* to see 'em! I'm Constable, ain't I? And charged to keep the peace? Well, what if I *am* as big as a house, and afraid of nobody, ain't I an elective officer? These Freeland people are my friends and kin. Always was and will be. But the Troopers ain't nobody's friends—nor enemies neither, for the matter o' that—only accordin' to how folks behave.

"Now, if I did what *they* do, I'd never get re-elected. But if they didn't do what they *do* do, I wouldn't get re-elected neither, see? Sure.

"Look here once: I'm Constable, and supposed to keep the peace. Well: And our people want peace, right enough and are goin' to get it. *But do you think they'd stand for one o' their own folks, like me, really botherin' in too much when some o' themselves gets lively?* Not on your life! 'Tain't in reason. I'd lose my job. So, State Police? Why, we *got* to have em! Gosh!"

Meantime, Corporal Freeman, his two men, and their three horses, settling into Freeland, began to take stock of the territory for thirty miles around.

Physically, it is a beautiful territory, though cruelly gashed and scarred by the hand of man tearing at the riches beneath the soil. Humanly, it is a human territory, full of people doing what people have always done when not much hampered by antecedents or by conventions.

Corporal Freeman and his men took stock of the region both as to geography and as to personnel. And now and again when something uncomfortable seemed likely to happen, Corporal Freeman and his men stretched out a calm, sure hand and broke that bud short off.

So came one fine Sunday, the 31st of September, 1917. All Freeland had been to church, or had played ball or pool or pinochle, or had sat on its front steps with the children and the dogs, the bright morning long. Now it had

just finished its dinner, pushed back its chair and begun to feel dull.

For example: Daniel Breslin, his wife and his wife's brother, still lingering at their table, desultorily cracking nuts—comfortable, satiated, and about talked out. Yet a few moments and one of them would surely get up with a yawn and, "Well, folks, guess I'll take a little nap."

Suddenly, like a stab in the back, a terrible scream split the sleepy air—from close by—from just across the street—the voice of a woman in desperate fear and pain.

"Good gracious!" cried Mrs. Breslin, "It's that poor creature again!"

"Again? Where? What do you mean?" Her brother was already up.

"Why, it's over in that little yellow house, in the alley across the way. Oh, poor thing, poor thing! Last night we heard just the same, and Dan telephoned Constable. Constable came and found an Italian beating his wife. He arrested the man. Locked him up. And this morning the woman ran over and told me she had no money, nor anything at all in the house for herself and her children to eat. So I gave her some food and she took it home. Oh, Lord have mercy on us! Ah-h!"

Another blood-curdling shriek. Mrs. Breslin crouched in her chair, covering her ears.

"I'm going across!" cried her brother.

"Don't, don't!" she implored. "You'll only get into some horrible mess and do no good at all."

But the front door slammed.

Five minutes later Shovlin stood again in the threshold, pushing before him a piteous thing.

"Here!"—he spoke through tightened lips. "Do what you can for her, sis, I couldn't leave her there!"

As Mrs. Breslin worked, stanching blood, the woman talked. "I want to tell every thing," she began.

Daniel Breslin listened awhile. Then he started for the street. "You stay here with them, Shovlin," he tossed back. "I'm going to put this up to the State Police themselves. It's full time it quit."

But Corporal Freeman, in the sub-station quarters, shook his head.

"If she wants her husband arrested, let her swear out

a warrant before a Justice of the Peace. Otherwise these are fool's errands," said he.

"Just wait, though, till I tell you: This is more than the common family row," Breslin went on. "When Constable arrested this fellow last night he locked him up. Today Squire Malloy fines him \$10, warns him and turns him loose. So tonight, of course, he simply hammers the woman again. And so far it's only the same old hopeless story. But there's more beyond: *The woman says he's a robber.*"

"That," said the Corporal, reaching for his helmet, "is a horse of another breed."

On the way down the street, stopping at the Central Hotel, he ran into the lobby and pulled forth Frank Malloy. For Frank Malloy is not tailor alone, you see, but County Detective as well, with a duty to handle this kind of thing, and to serve thereto as witness. Together the three entered Breslin's door.

But the woman was gone.

"She wouldn't wait," explained Mrs. Breslin. "She was too afraid of what might come to the children. So after you left, Dan, weak as she was, she ran back home to them. And now Brother's hanging around outside lest he kills her entirely before the Trooper arrives. Oh, make haste! For the love of God, make haste, do!"

Another moment, and the Corporal, followed by Frank Malloy, entered the little shack in the alley across the way.

The room itself told at a glance its tale of utter shiftlessness and want. A stove, a bench, a chair or two, a dirty lamp, a pan or so, no more. And on the bench, the woman, cowering, her eyes on the door to the room beyond.

Her thick, black hair, lank with blood and water, hung heavy on her neck. Her white bodice, split and tattered, showed great splashes of fresh red. Her two hands, clamps of nervous terror, clutched her skirts on either side. Her face, ghastly in its lean and livid fever, never turned from that inner door.

"Good evening," said the Corporal.

No sign.

"She's deaf, may be," Malloy suggested.

The Corporal walked over and laid a hand on her arm. With a gasp she sprang up, shrinking back. As she moved

they saw the thing that her widespread skirt had sheltered—three little children, huddled on the floor.

"It's all right," said Freeman.

Then, recognizing the uniform, she fell to kissing his hand.

"He's in there!" she cried, tumultuously, indicating the door. "And I can't stand any more—not *any* more. I want to tell all about him this very night, even if he kills me. Killing is better than this. I'm deaf. See? Well, he kicked me deaf. We are starving—the children and me. He drinks half the time and we get no food. Only this. Look here!"

She pulled aside her blouse to show a hideous raw mark across her breast.

"He gave me that last night. Tonight it was this," and she pushed apart the masses of her hair revealing a long fresh cut laying open the scalp.

"Now, he'll do these things to me, I guess, as long as I live. Yes. Because I belong to him. I'm his wife. But must he kill the children, too? The little, little children that do no hurt at all? Then listen: I *will* tell. He's done more. He's a robber. *A robber*, I tell you! Sure you can get him for that?"

The appeal in her face was terrible to see.

"It was just after we were married. He came home one night and he showed me—"

But the Trooper stopped her short. "You can tell us anything you like," he quietly assured her, "but I'll bring your husband in here first to hear what you have to say."

A moment later the Corporal emerged from the inner room, shoving before him a man—a man of medium height, slight, with a mop of curly black hair, a long, flowing black moustache and a chin blue and rough with stubble beard. His glittering eyes travelled sidewise, from the woman to his captor, then back, and back again, and his fingers opened and clenched.

"Is this your husband?" asked the Corporal.

"Yes."

"What is your name?" The grip on the man's shoulder took a visible touch of emphasis.

"Alfonso Passo."

"Yes. And I am Jennie Passo, his wife. And tonight I speak."

The children had stolen forward to her knees. Their big black eyes stared out of colorless, skeleton faces. The eldest, a girl perhaps five years old, showed utter terror in every line. The second was just too little to understand.

Now the mother spread her arms before them, pressing them back against her own poor body, as she launched into speech. It was like some small, weak, terrified, outraged animal—like a beaten, bleeding starveling bitch, briefly exalted into valor by pain and fear.

So, in a high-pitched monotone, she poured out her tale—fast, faster, as if she feared lest her courage wane or means be found to stop her breath before the last word was done.

When she married this man,—and that was October 21st, eight years ago, perish the day,—he had scarcely a penny to his name, she affirmed. He worked a little, about the mines, but only a little. They lived on credit and at once were worse than poor. Then came a night five weeks, may be from the wedding, when Passo, who had left her that morning with a curse to fill the empty cupboard, returned in haste.

“Clean up to leave right away. We’ve got to get out of here,” he urged. And he showed her a fat purse.

“Where did you get it?” she asked.

“Took it off a girl,” he leered, “a very nice little girl.”

Even as she tied the knot of their bundle, he flung her out of the house. By the shortest cut he made for the outskirts of the village; thence, avoiding both highways and byways, across country and away. Until three o’clock in the morning they tramped through the brush, she spent with fatigue, he pushing and pulling her with blows and oaths, till they reached the town of Hazleton, and an obscure Italian inn.

There they spent the remnant of the night.

But before they slept he rewarded her with a glimpse of the contents of the purse. One hundred and fifty-nine dollars, it contained,—a fortune.

“Where did you get it?” again she asked.

“Off a girl—a very nice little girl,” once more he replied—“and I bet she’ll suffer for it, too.”

“And that morning we took a train to New York, and we staid in New York a week,” the woman gasped on, “then we came back here to Freeland and staid just one

single day. That very night we crept out like before, and back to New York again. For he——” she half rose from her seat in her desperate eagerness, pointing with outstretched arm at the man before her—“*he* said the police were hunting him *because he had robbed the girl!* Yes, you did, you did, no matter if you kill me for it! Can you deny it? Will you deny it? What?”

Slowly the man's eyes fell before her frenzied challenge.

“Mr. Passo”—now it was the officer of State Police who spoke—“Mr. Passo, you have listened to what your wife has been telling me. What have you to say? Is it the truth?”

Silent, the Italian bowed his head.

So Corporal Freeman and Frank Malloy, one on either side, led him away to the familiar jail, and, on charge of assault and battery, locked him up to await the morrow's hearing by the Justice of the Peace.

Then the Corporal struck into his job.

Eight years ago, if the story was true, a girl, age, name and character unknown, had been robbed of a sum not smaller than one hundred and fifty-nine dollars, at an unknown place within such distance of Freeland as a man by any means might reach and return from in a day's time. Who was the girl, what the place?

In its actual setting, among surroundings so heterogeneous, the question was vague. Eight years ago anything might have happened here,—and, happening, might have been deeply overlaid with the dust of later events. Besides, since no arrest had been made, who would remember so little a thing—who but the criminal and the victim of his crime?

“No, *I* never heard tell of it.” “No, *I* don't reck'lect,” answered one after another of the neighbors round about.

“Just think again,” the Corporal urged, where the will seemed good. “Think way back.”

But nobody knew.

Corporal Freeman, late 12th United States Infantry, with a fine Philippine record, now of the Pennsylvania State Police—this Corporal Freeman took a fresh grip. “If Passo is a robber,” he said to himself, “I can't let him loose on the community without a better fight than this.”

For, as in a vision, he saw a second release of the wife



beater, whose next move, in view of his wife's rebellion, would logically be to kill her first and then to disappear for good.

"If he's a robber," thought Freeman, "I must be able to prefer the charge immediately after the Justice's hearing tomorrow night."

So he struck out on a broader line.

But nobody seemed to know.

And then it was that a minor inspiration skipped into the Corporal's head.

"McGee," buzzed that little, thin voice, "McGee would remember if any one does—McGee."

Now Mr. McGee, since many years, had been field reporter for the papers of Hazleton, the biggest neighboring town. It was his business to know everything, and his gift to forget nothing entirely that once had lodged in his mind.

"Let me see," pondered Mr. McGee, white-haired and ruddy-faced, looking up from his copy and tilting back his chair—"Does that bring anything back? Eight years ago—1909.—That was the year that 'C' Troop moved up from Reading, and all Berks County put up such a howl about letting it go—the year Sergeant Beck cleaned out the Black Hand at Hazleton, and Oftedahl, of yours, saved half a township from burning off the map.—Yes—I know.—Little girl robbed? Let's see: Why, sure!

"There was a Polish family, living over Highlands way. I don't recall their name just now. But they sent this girl over to the office of the mine where the man worked, one pay-day, with a handful of checks to cash. Later they said that on her way home the girl was robbed. No arrest was made, and considerable doubt was felt whether any such robbery had really taken place. There wasn't any sequel. It just died out. Here, I've got the name for you now. It's Voichek. Over in Highlands they lived."

So, by short cuts and corner clippings, in the least time possible, Corporal Freeman reached Highlands and its main street.

As a matter of fact, though, Highlands has but one street, and only a score, more or less, of dwellings. Highlands is just a "mining patch." All its houses are exactly alike and all painted red. Each has before it a sizable

yard, of exactly the same dimensions as its neighbors, fenced with miscellaneous collections of rough slabs, derelict laths and slats, and such other longish wooden things as come handy. Each toes the common line, to an inch, and all together wear, somehow, the air of a comfortable, if very informal front-row orchestra audience at a Saturday night mill town movie.

It is their strict alignment, their many windows, and above all, the scene before them, that impart that auditory air. When you look for the first time beyond the muddy road skirting their gates, with its amiable population of puppies, hens and ducks, and over the spine of the long, grey culm-bank couched on its farther side like a flotsam-whale on a beach, you fairly catch your breath.

For beyond that culm-bank the ground drops away with a sudden plunge—disappears—gives place to spacious void. And where you see solid earth again, it is far away, distance-hazed, of strange and grandiose outline.

There, on the high skyline, above the mountains' flowing shoulders, for mile on mile, the bold silhouettes of the breakers cut the sky. Peaks of coal-refuse, absolutely conical, black as night, enormous—like unspent volcanoes of a wizard's dream—rise, preposterous, against the clouds. "Strippings," sharp and raw as Culebra Cut, slash big scars of yellow across the plane. And everywhere between, like the remnants of an exquisite verdure tapestry rent by swords and blown to bits by guns, lie the tattered remnants of the beauty of the world.

But Corporal Freeman, for the moment, saw none of these things. Corporal Freeman's mind was fixed on the front-row orchestra chairs. In which of those twin red houses did the Voichkek family live? He looked down the line. Some showed trig and tidy, some debatable, some frankly down at heel. Some had occupied that sizable front yard with a vegetable garden that must have equalled a twenty per cent addition to the tenants' means. Some stopped at a bed of marigolds and a red geranium or two. Some ran entirely to empty cans.

"I hope I draw a good one," the Corporal thought. And he asked a tow-head swinging on a gate: "Where does Mr. Voichkek live?"

"Last house," said tow-head. "End of the row."

And in very fact, the last house, at the end of the row, was the neatest one of all.

Mrs. Voichek sat in the kitchen, with the new baby in her arms. The stove beside her bloomed as smoothly black as care and polish could make it. The bare floor had earned that good soft grey that is the fruit of soap and water. The window panes shone spotless. The scanty furniture stood orderly aligned. On the walls hung a crucifix, and certain bright-toned religious prints.

Mrs. Voichek, herself of an austere neatness, sat with Michael, the new baby, nursing in her arms. And her face, modest, open, seemed full of gentle calm. As the Corporal entered, two other children, girl and boy, appearing from somewhere, came and stood behind her chair. They, too, were sweet-faced, gentle mannered, still.

The woman rose to meet her guest.

"Will you please take a place, sir?" she asked. And she motioned to a child to bring forward a chair.

The Corporal launched at once into his errand. The whole atmosphere denied a reason for calculated approach.

"I understand," said he, "that some eight years ago one of your family, a girl, was robbed. It is my business, as an officer of the State Police, to do my best to set such things right, no matter how long past they may be. So I come to you to ask for information as to when and where the thing occurred and all concerning it."

As he began to speak the woman had bowed her head. Now she raised it again, but over her face of an ageing peasant Madonna had settled a cloud of distress.

"Must I speak of it, sir?" she asked.

"I want to help you."

"Ah! It is too late. Too late for that. But you are State Officer. I will tell you all I know."

As she talked on, haltingly, searching her way in a language hard and strange to her tongue, the picture grew before the Corporal's eyes. He saw this thing that had happened eight years, lacking a month, ago. He saw this same little red house, neat and clean and orderly, this same woman, happy then, and eight years nearer the comeliness of her youth. He saw the miner, her husband, sober, hard-working, decent, each night returning from his toil, soot-faced and weary, but happy, too. Happy because his home was happy, his wife kind, good and thrifty, his multi-

plying children obedient, strong and bright, his little account in the bank growing bit by bit, day by day. All then was well in Voichек's world. He asked no more of it than that it should continue as it went. And his eldest child, his twelve-year-old Annie, was the pride and joy of his life.

Like a flight of steps the children ran, from Annie to the year-old baby. And Voichек and his wife hugged an ambition, a will, that was almost an obsession, for them all. Their ambition was that each and every chick should grow up in the fear of God, in devotion to the Catholic Church, and in full enjoyment of the education so liberally offered by the public schools. Their will, to work early and late, to save cent by cent, and to lay up means that should safely establish the rising family.

So, among other economies, they filled all their spare room with boarders—other miners, like Voichек himself, that no way be neglected of adding to their store.

Community of occupation naturally united in many ways the household so composed. In many things the boarders and their host pooled interest, to save either effort or time. For example, it was needless that each man, climbing out of his pit on pay day afternoon, should walk all the way to Jeddo, and the company office, to draw his week's earnings. Rather let each, with his pay-check in his pocket, hasten home, wash off the coal-black and plunge at once into good old Saturday night. Little Annie, with all the checks in her hand, could trudge through the woods to Jeddo, and bring back everybody's cash.

This, week after week, little Annie did.

So came the fifteenth day of November, 1909,—a day forever to be marked in bitter black. It was pay-day once again. Annie scrubbed her face till her cheeks and forehead glittered, braided her soft, brown hair so tight that only the smallest curls could escape, and pulled her short-sleeved jumper over her frock, because of the autumn pinch in the air.

Annie was little and round, brown-eyed and very gentle. Her mother kissed her, as she laid the checks in her hand. Any woman must have kissed her, then—the child was so open-gazed, so innocent and sweet.

So, alone, she set out for Jeddo town, down the hill, across the valley, and up the hill again. So, alone, she came

to Jeddo office, gazed once more in awe at its four-square stone solidity, walked modestly up to the pay-window and offered her vouchers to the cashier. A kindly man, this cashier, and always good to the child. Now he even made some one wait—some stranger that Annie scarcely noticed and did not know,—while he counted out the sum of the checks and passed it down within reach of her short arms.

“Be careful, Annie,” said he, “you’ve got a pretty big roll today.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you, sir,” answered the child, fastening the envelope into her safest place—the bosom of her dress.

Then she set out on her homeward way.

*(To be concluded)*